



Published on NCSE (<https://ncse.com>)

[Home](#) > Royal Society furor over creationism

SHARE TWEET EMAIL [PRINT](#) [1]

[NCSE Staff](#) [2]

09.18.2008

[Royal Society furor over creationism](#) [3]



The director of education for the Royal Society of London, Michael Reiss, resigned from his position on September 16, 2008, in the wake of a controversy occasioned by his recent remarks on creationism. According to a September 16, 2008, [press release](#) [4] from the Royal Society, "Some of Professor Michael Reiss's recent comments, on the issue of creationism in schools, while speaking as the Royal Society's Director of Education, were open to misinterpretation. While it was not his intention, this has led to damage to the Society's reputation. As a result, Professor Reiss and the Royal Society have agreed that, in the best interests of the Society, he will step down immediately as Director of Education."

Reiss's remarks were apparently offered during the British Association for the Advancement of Science's Festival of Science, which took place September 6-11, 2008, in Liverpool; he subsequently posted a corresponding essay, "[Science lessons should tackle creationism and intelligent design,](#)" [5] on the *Guardian's* science blog on September 11, 2008. In the latter, Reiss posed the question, "What should science teachers do when faced with students who are creationists?" and answered that "when teaching evolution, there is much to be said for allowing students to raise any doubts they have (hardly a revolutionary idea in science teaching) and doing one's best to have a genuine discussion."

Reiss added, "The word 'genuine' doesn't mean that creationism or intelligent design deserve equal time." He was also careful to note that whether such a discussion would be appropriate depends "on the comfort of the teacher in dealing with such issues and the make-up of the student body," adding, "I don't believe that such teaching is easy." Nevertheless, he insisted, "I do believe in taking seriously and respectfully the concerns of students who do not accept the theory of evolution, while still introducing them to it. While it is unlikely that this will help students who have a conflict between science and their

religious beliefs to resolve the conflict, good science teaching can help students to manage it -- and to learn more science."

Unfortunately, the content of Reiss's message was distorted and sensationalized in the British media. For example, the *Times* of London's story (September 12, 2008) was headlined "Leading scientist urges teaching of creationism in schools," and [began](#) [6], "Creationism should be taught in science classes as a legitimate point of view, according to the Royal Society, putting the august science body on a collision course with the Government"; the *Telegraph*'s story (September 11, 2008) was similarly [headlined](#) [7] "Creationism should be taught in science classes, says expert," and subheaded, "The theory of creationism should be taught alongside evolution in school science lessons, a leading biologist and education expert has said."

The Royal Society observed in a September 12, 2008, [press release](#) [8] that "The Royal Society is opposed to creationism being taught as science," citing the 2006 Interacademy Panel [statement](#) [9] (PDF) on the teaching of evolution, to which the Royal Society is a signatory. It also quoted a clarification from Reiss: "Creationism has no scientific basis. However, when young people ask questions about creationism in science classes, teachers need to be able to explain to them why evolution and the Big Bang are scientific theories but they should also take the time to explain how science works and why creationism has no scientific basis."

Nevertheless, there was a quick outcry from a number of British scientists. Richard Roberts, a member of the Royal Society and a Nobel Prize winner, sent a [letter](#) [10] endorsed by his fellow laureates Harold Kroto and John Sulston to the Royal Society, complaining about Reiss's remarks as reported; he was [quoted](#) [11] in the *Guardian* (September 14, 2008) as saying, "I think it is outrageous that this man is suggesting that creationism should be discussed in a science classroom. It is an incredible idea and I am drafting a letter to other Nobel laureates -- which would be sent to the Royal Society -- to ask that Reiss be made to stand down."

Part of the outcry centered on the fact that, in addition to being a biologist and professor of science education, Reiss is also a clergyman, ordained in the Church of England. Richard Dawkins told the *Guardian* (September 14, 2008), "A clergyman in charge of education for the country's leading scientific organisation -- it's a Monty Python sketch," and Roberts's letter to the Royal Society commented, "We gather Professor Reiss is a clergyman, which in itself is very worrisome. Who on earth thought that he would be an appropriate Director of Education, who could be expected to answer questions about the differences between science and religion in a scientific, reasoned way?"

Subsequently, in a September 16, 2008, [letter](#) [12] to *New Scientist*, Dawkins distanced himself from the call for Reiss's ouster, describing Roberts's letter's complaint about Reiss's clerical status as "a little too close to a witch-hunt for my squeamish taste," characterizing his Monty Python comparison as "a little uncharitable," and commenting, "Although I disagree with him, what he actually said at the British Association is not obviously silly like creationism itself, nor is it a self-evidently inappropriate stance for the Royal Society to take." (He also mentioned "Eugenie Scott, whose National Center for Science Education is doing splendid work in fighting the creationist wingnuts in America"!)

It wasn't only scientists who were critical of Reiss's remarks as reported. Phil Willis, a Member of Parliament who chairs the Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, took umbrage, [telling](#) [13] the *Times of London* (September 16, 2008), "I was horrified to hear these views and I reject them totally. They are a step too far and they fly in the face of what science is about. I think if his

[Professor Reiss's] views are as mentioned they may be incompatible with his position." After Reiss's resignation, Willis expressed satisfaction with the result, [telling](#) [14] the *Times* (September 17, 2008), "I hope the society will now stop burying its head and start taking on creationism."

Not all members of the British scientific community were critical of Reiss. After his resignation, Roland Jackson, chief executive of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, [told](#) [15] BBC News (September 16, 2008) that his departure was a "real loss," adding, "I was at the actual discussion and what I heard him say, however it has been reported, was essentially the position advocated by the Royal Society." Robert Winston, professor of science and society at Imperial College London and a distinguished medical scientist and science popularizer, lamented, "This is not a good day for the reputation of science or scientists." Reiss is returning to his position of Professor of Science Education at the Institute of Education at the University of London.

[General](#) [16]

[2008](#) [17]

[International](#) [18]

[+ read](#) [3]

Source URL: <https://ncse.com/news/2008/09/royal-society-furor-over-creationism-002131#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://ncse.com/printpdf/13247>

[2] <https://ncse.com/users/ncse-staff>

[3] <https://ncse.com/news/2008/09/royal-society-furor-over-creationism-002131>

[4] <http://royalsociety.org/news.asp?id=8008>

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2008/sep/11/michael.reiss.creationism>

[6] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article4734767.ece>

[7] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/politics/education/2798162/Creationism-should-be-taught-in-science-classes-says-expert.html>

[8] <http://royalsociety.org/news.asp?year=&id=8004>

[9] <http://www.interacademies.net/Object.File/Master/6/150/Evolution%20statement.pdf>

[10] <http://richarddawkins.net/article,3119,n,n>

[11] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/sep/14/religion>

[12] <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn14748-letter-richard-dawkins-on-the-royal-society-row.html>

[13] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article4760967.ece>

[14] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/science/article4768820.ece>

[15] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/7619670.stm

[16] <https://ncse.com/general>

[17] <https://ncse.com/news/2008>

[18] <https://ncse.com/news/international>